

The Reality about Reality T.V.

(A Christian Response to “Big Brother”)

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1. A Brief History

Why has the country come to such a standstill over the phenomenon of reality television? Why have these twelve young people so captured the imagination of the country that every newspaper daily has led with cover page news about *Big Brother*?

Reality TV is not a new phenomenon. From the seemingly innocent beginnings of Allen Funt's *Candid Camera*, which has been on and off television since 1948, through the disturbing phenomenon of the ambush genre of the Jerry Springer and Ricki Lake shows, to the latest crop of *Survivor* and *Big Brother*, televised voyeurism (I'll define that word just now) has invaded our collective consciousness. The impact of reality TV brought the United Kingdom to a grinding standstill and it is likely to do the same here. The final phone vote in Britain was 7.5 million, one in seven of the adult British population.

Reality TV is in fact a direct descendant of talk show TV. There is little conceptual difference between *Jerry Springer*, *Judge Judy*, or *Survivor*. Reality TV is a symptom of a society that no longer trusts traditional authority – government, the judiciary, the Church and the Broadcasting corporation. It offers the illusion that you can bypass the packaging of 'normal TV', or the propaganda of social institutions, and see how 'real' people behave in certain hypothetical scenarios.

Without faith in traditional social institutions to guide the public in moral decision-making, Reality TV is the contemporary version of a morality play.

A key characteristic of post-modernity is the notion that we can only trust our experience. Hence the popularity of Reality TV, not least *Big Brother*.

2. A few Problems

The values and behaviour of some of the housemates on *Big Brother* remind me of the move to greater lawlessness and godlessness in our society. As such it is a little sign of what the Bible predicts in passages like 2 Thessalonians 2: 1 – 4, Romans 1: 18 – 32 and 2 Timothy 3: 2 – 4.

I don't know about you, but I think a pretty good description of *Big Brother* is that it presents as an anti-social, anti-law, anti-God community (not necessarily all the contestants).

2.1. Anti-social; so much of *Big Brother* revolves around (and generates) gossip, rejection, eviction, manipulation. It promotes selfishness and self-centredness instead of other-centeredness.

Ironically, *Big Brother*, though it was designed to create relationships it is actually a very cruel game because it tears those very relationships apart to create drama as the house members are voted off. If that is not anti-social then I don't know what is.

It is also abusive of people. Think about these two aspects:

a. Contestants are Abused by the Viewers

People have always been interested in people. But when we turn our lurid gaze towards dysfunctional others, leer into their private moments, we are actually looking at ourselves. We project our own inner torment onto other people. And what this breeds and develops is a dehumanising process that actually lessens our regard for other people.

It's dehumanising because it objectifies individuals, requiring us to marvel at their exhibitionism, mock their stupidity and laugh at their dysfunctions. We are not there to understand them or to care about them. This kind of television has made people the ultimate commodity. We consume them to fill our boring lives.

b. Contestants are Abused by the Media

There is nothing ordinary about these “ordinary people”; they have been carefully selected, selectively edited and expertly packaged. It is the greatest monument of the media.

In *Big Brother* a bunch of clichéd, young, body-conscious people are put together under the most artificial of circumstances. They are asked to do meaningless things like keeping a fire burning for a few days. We are asked to believe these activities have purpose because their rations will be cut if they fail, in situations where there are no criteria for either success or failure. They are encouraged to talk about themselves, their feelings and their bonding experiences. When they are not talking about themselves, psychologists will be drafted in to talk about them talking about themselves.

What we are actually watching is heavily censored, cleverly edited, structured, selected, predetermined slots of a structured and controlled situation. Or, to put it another way: rats trapped in a very public maze.

Furthermore, the contestants are misrepresented. In her hard-hitting documentary for Panorama television, Mariella Frostrup clearly showed that the contestants of *Big Brother 1* (in the UK) were highly edited and contrived. Melanie Hill was highly upset by the reaction she received

when she left the *Big Brother* house in London. She had no idea about how she had been portrayed in the daily crossings and was alarmed to find out that she had come across as “the preying mantis” of the group. This is not difficult to do when you consider that from roughly 650 hours of daily footage with the numerous cameras situated around the house, she could be portrayed as flirtatious and scheming in the 5 minute daily cross over, by ensuring that every time she was screened she would be seen having physical contact with a man or plotting another contestant’s downfall.

2.2. Anti-Law (i.e. God’s Law)

Hundreds of thousands of viewers tune-in with the hope of seeing nudity, flirting and sexual intimacy of some sort. And of course all of us have heard about (if not seen) the “cucumber episode”. I don’t think anybody could deny that *Big Brother* is promoting (not amorality) but immorality. So August 2001 issue of Southern Cross (an Australian Anglican newspaper) reads: “**Big Brother points to the future of television – a carnival that involves widespread participation and subverts traditional values.**”

The Bible speaks at great length of the sinfulness and brokenness of humankind. We are seeing this today as there is no escape from people determined to show just how depraved they really are – on TV, on the Web, in the video store, or flashing in public arenas like the recent Currie Cup final at Newlands or the security camera at a retail store. The hell they are creating is called voyeurism.

According to the Collins English Dictionary *Voyeur* comes from a French word meaning a person who gets sexual pleasure or excitement from the observation of someone undressing, having intercourse, etc.

Wednesday morning's paper...

Voyeurism was once a minority pastime: the sad men in dirty raincoats who visited strip joints, the village Peeping Toms, the perverts gratifying their perversions.

Add to this the regular, overgenerous diet of freaks, deviants and sad losers we see regularly on our TV screens, and we have a sad reflection of modern society.

The excellent talk shows of the 1970s, when under the direction of hosts like Phil Donahue ordinary people discussed issues that affected their daily lives with a semblance of educative purpose, are a thing of the past. The sleaze and voyeurism came stealthily to attract audiences, and then became the only reason for the existence of such programmes. Donahue left the industry, publicly expressing disgust. Where the discussion programmes just occasionally brought bizarre, dysfunctional behaviour before the cameras, now it is only by being bizarre that one can get in front of the cameras at all.

The success of sleaze talk whetted our appetite for a more overt form of voyeurism. It arrived in the form of reality television.

This voyeurism is so very far removed from a truly Christian worldview. For example listen to the Apostle Paul - Philippians 4: 8 “Finally brothers, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable – if anything is excellent or praiseworthy – think about such things.”

Errol Naidoo as quoted in an *African Christian Action* article: “The social impact of programming devoid of morality and traditional family values are sadly evident in our society today.” Young people who are being raised on a steady diet of promiscuous sex, violence, murder, and “reality” TV will undoubtedly be morally stunted. The incessant demand for more “realistic entertainment” is often the excuse used by TV stations to absolve themselves from their social responsibility towards society. The disastrous consequences of the “we’re just giving them what they want” mantra is self-evident in the horrific statistics of sexual immorality, crime, violence, corruption and an increasingly valueless society.

The world of course calls this freedom (!). Ever since the devil lied to Adam and Eve we humans seem to think that to be “free” means discarding God’s law. The 10 commandments, we are told, are restrictive and burdensome. “Throw them away, do your own thing and then you will be free.” But our rebellion has led not to freedom – only to disaster.

Throughout history flight has been used as a symbol of freedom. “I wish I was as free as a bird.”!

One of the most successful attempts to dramatise the notion that ‘flight is freedom’ must surely be *Jonathon Livingston Seagull*, the runaway best-seller by Richard Bach, which was published in 1970 and illustrated by evocative, black-and-white, silhouette photographs of gulls. The message of the book, with its emphasis on self-transcendence, anticipated New Age thinking. Jonathon Seagull’s ambition knew no bounds. He was determined to fly faster than sound, faster than light, as fast as thought itself. For he knew that ‘he was not bone and feather, but a perfect idea of freedom and flight, limited by nothing at all’ (p63).

The application to human beings is easy. We are free, the book implies, to be what we want to be and to go where we want to go, and nothing should stand in the way of our self-actualisation. So when Richard Bach left his wife and his six children, he admitted that freedom was the issue, and nothing must be allowed to hinder our personal freedom, not even marriage and family.

The *biblical* road to freedom, however, is the exact opposite. True freedom is not freedom from responsibility to God and others, in order to live for ourselves; it is rather freedom from preoccupation with ourselves, in order to live for God and others. As Jesus himself taught, the way to self-discovery is self-denial. If we insist on living for ourselves, we will lose ourselves; only if we are willing to lose ourselves in loving will we truly find ourselves. Only when we die to our own self-centredness do we begin to live (cf. Mark 8: 34 – 37).

2.3. Anti-God

Big Brother is promoting a worldview that worships “*I, me, myself*” and not the God & Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. It is a worldview that, while it accommodates human ideas of god, refuses to worship the One true God who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. God is *holy* but it promotes unholiness. God is *love* but it promotes rejection and selfishness. God is *light* but it promotes sin. God is *Lord* but it promotes disregard for His authority. God is *Saviour* but it mocks the idea that anyone needs salvation. God is *Judge* but it presents a world view devoid of ultimate accountability, devoid of right and wrong, devoid of the reality of final judgement.

So three problems, from a Christian point of view: anti-social, anti-law, anti-God.

3. Money & Fame

If these problems are true, then why do so many people queue up with the hope of being chosen as a contestant on Big Brother? I want to give you two reasons. Money & Fame!

3.1. The **money** part is obvious motivation. The victor of each of the Survivor series took home a million US dollars, while the winner of the current Big Brother series will receive a million rand.

3.2. Then there's the **fame** part. The shows have made instant celebrities out of regular men and women who would most likely have endured anonymity forever if they had not been selected.

In the U.S., Elizabeth Filarsky of *Survivor 2* has acquired her own television talk show and been a Judge of the Miss Teen USA pageant; while her fellow competitor, Jerri Manthey, was due to appear naked in the American edition of *Playboy* in September. Fame. Everyone wants to be famous, and that means getting on television by hook or by crook. If exercising this right means reducing ourselves to the base level of beasts, so be it.

Why do people want fame? It's because we want to matter, we want to count for something. We want our lives to be meaningful. It is in fact the whole question of self-esteem.

One of the most crucial elements in human maturity is the development of proper self-esteem. Some people have an inflated view of their own importance, while others have crippling inferiority feelings. In place of both extremes (having too high or too low a self-regard) we need to think of

ourselves, the apostle Paul wrote, 'with sober judgement' (Romans 12: 3). And in order to do this, we need to remember who we are, according to Scripture. On the one-hand, we have dignity as human beings made in the image of God, and on the other depravity as sinners under the judgement of God. We are the products both of the creation and of the fall. This is the paradox of our humanness.

Of the two unbalanced extremes (superiority and inferiority), the second may well be the commoner today. Many people feel unwanted and unloved, and consider themselves to be worthless. So it's very important that Jesus spoke of our 'value' as human beings, and compared and contrasted it with the value of sparrows. 'Don't be afraid', he said; 'you are worth more than many sparrows' (Matthew 10: 31; Luke 12: 7). He deliberately chose the most insignificant little creature he could think of, and then argued from the lesser to the greater. If not a single sparrow 'is forgotten by God' (Luke 12: 6), or 'will fall to the ground' apart from his knowledge and permission (Matthew 10: 29), how much more will he be remembered and protect his human children?

This assurance grows when we recall that sparrows have a poor reputation and are often regarded as useless and disposable.

It was in 1967, when she was an athletic teenager, that Joni Eareckson Tada broke her neck in a driving accident in Chesapeake Bay. It left her totally and permanently paralysed. After twenty-five years in a wheelchair she began to have health problems and had to go back to bed. Hoping to cheer her up, her husband Ken hung a bird feeder outside her window. At first she envied the birds their freedom. But then she remembered what Jesus had said about sparrows. She wrote:

"I glanced at the bird feeder and smiled. I could understand Jesus noticing an eagle...But a scrappy Sparrow? They're a dime a dozen. Jesus said so

himself. Yet from thousands of bird species the Lord chose the most insignificant, least-noticed, scruffiest bird of all. A pint-sized thing that even dedicated birdwatchers ignore. That thought alone calmed my fears. I felt significant and noticed...If the great God of heaven concerns himself with a ragtag little Sparrow clinging to the bird feeder outside my window, he cares about you.”

The only way to develop a true sense of self-worth is to come to recognize our value to God. Jesus declared on the one hand that not a single sparrow is forgotten by God, and on the other that we are worth more than many sparrows. It is a ‘how much more’ argument. If God cares for sparrows, which in some ways are the most insignificant of all birds, how much more does he care about us? Indeed, he has proved his love for us in the cross of Christ. As Archbishop William Temple once put it, “my worth is what I am worth to God, and that is a marvelous great deal, for Christ died for me”.

Recap...

Conclusion

I want to close by saying that *Big Brother* reminds us of our desperate need to know God and His love for us.

True **community** is found only in the Church of Jesus Christ, where he is the head and every member a brother or sister.

True **freedom** is found in knowing God & loving His law. Freedom is being who God created me to be, i.e. a human being who loves God and obeys His law.

True **significance** is found in understanding that I am created in God’s image and Christ died for me. That’s how valuable I am to God. That’s how important I really am.

Community, freedom, significance. They are found only in knowing God. And Jesus Christ came so that we *can* know God.

John 10: 10 “The thief comes only to steal and to kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.”